

Yellow sand of Berlin

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ABSTRACT While conducting fieldwork in Berlin in 1996 and 1997, I encountered a *Zeitgeist* of ‘becoming’ enveloping all aspects of my life in the city – from the sensory experiences of walking a metropolis under intense revision, to listening to public discourse on the future of the ‘New Berlin’ as symbol of German cosmopolitanism, to hearing my East German interlocutors recount the erasure of the GDR past from the historical narratives of unified Germany. This essay in literary ethnography seeks to capture this collective mood and sense of simultaneous becoming and erasure by weaving anecdotal observations, encounters and reflections oriented by the metaphor of shifting sands. It recalls a host of dialectical apparitions in the politics of German unification, in contemporary East–West relations in the profession of journalism, and in the ratio of historical effacement to futurological manifesto in the built environment of the city itself.

KEY WORDS Berlin, dialecticism, journalism, memory, East/West relations, Germany

For Paul Friedrich

Fieldwork, it seems to me, is more often phenomenological than we like to admit it is – a relentless search to find order in the often happenstance series of events engaging us in everyday life. At the same time, we demand from ourselves insight into the ‘depth’ of the social order and cultural logics

unfolding around us. Otherwise, how are we 'ethnographers' and not 'flâneurs'? While in Berlin, I was struck time and again by a kind of Zeitgeist of 'becoming' infiltrating all aspects of my life in the city – from the sensory experiences of walking a city under intense revision, to listening to public discourse on the future of the 'New Berlin' as a symbol of German cosmopolitanism, to hearing my East German interlocutors recount the erasure of the GDR past from the historical narratives of unified Germany. Perhaps it should not have surprised me to find such a pervasive dialectics of potentiality and actuality in Hegel's adoptive city. But, I had and continue to have terrible trouble in articulating this feeling ethnographically. Remaining true to the phenomenology of transformation has seemed to preclude analytical 'depth'. In fact, it was only after returning home that I began to see a causal logic to this phenomenology in Berlin's history as a locus of national identity-formation in Germany. But, sitting quietly in my office or in the library and undertaking this archaeology of social, political, and historical context demanded a kind of quid pro quo erasure of the dialecticism which was so much the companion of my research. As a work of literary ethnography, it is my hope that this essay captures some of the apparitions of historical becoming and erasure that I encountered in Berlin in 1996 and 1997. I ask the reader's patience with the aphoristic qualities of the text – I fit anecdotal observations, encounters and reflections together roughly to offer glimpses of significance in their juxtaposition instead of intercalating them into seamless argumentation. The two poetic stanzas were composed during my fieldwork as a first attempt to capture Berlin's 'spirit of becoming' in the metaphor of shifting sands. The rest of the essay evolved slowly over the next few years as I recalled a host of dialectical apparitions in the politics of German unification, in contemporary East–West relations in the profession of journalism, and in the ratio of historical effacement to futurological manifesto in the built environment of the city itself.

yellow sand of Berlin
 the pirates and caravels that you have seen
 the treasure of a thousand ships
 chokes your harbor
 build a city on their cages
 let it float above the river

'You see,' Karl gestures around him, 'Berlin is built entirely upon sand, upon the Prussian sand-bed, and after the city was completely destroyed during the war, some people thought that, well, why not just rebuild the city somewhere else, leave the ruins to the sands. But, there were a lot of these ideas tossed around after the war, and most of them were never taken seriously.'

Karl and I are walking near Alexanderplatz, the former center of the

former East Berlin. The cloak of winter grey is yielding to a chill dusk; we pick our way across monumental streets of rush hour traffic. I had been marveling at the blocks of socialist-era flats that still stand clustered around the former city center and had wondered aloud at the totality of destruction that must have anticipated such a complete reworking of the cityscape. Rather than attempt to reconstruct the ancient rubble of the city center, the GDR – the German Democratic Republic – saw in their half of ruined Berlin a glorious *tabula rasa* upon which the first German socialist capital could be realized. Meanwhile, the FRG – the Federal Republic of Germany – determined that the three allied occupation zones of West Berlin should be preserved and rebuilt as a symbol of Germany's freedom from its totalitarian past. Before long the cold warriors of both the eastern and western cities were busying themselves actualizing their own vision of Berlin as a cosmopolitan center. The western city as an oasis of free opinion and conspicuous consumption set into the bleached desert of the East. The eastern city as a center of socialist unity and bulwark against the superficial splendor of the western 'class enemy'. The architecture of both sides was meant to iconify this sibling rivalry. The glass-and-steel triumphs and restored 19th-century proletarian flats of the West symbolized a cosmopolis with its legs akimbo, one firmly nestled in the pre-war industrial Berlin of Brecht and Weill, the other poised to step confidently into the post-industrial millennium. The forest of towering apartment blocks in the East signified the resuscitation of the spirits of socialist Berlin, galvanized into one revolutionary voice by the unified labor power of the workers' state. The politicians and built environment of each side boasted into the mirror of the wall for decades, each side seeking recognition of its unmitigated virtue in the sins it perceived in the other, each side struggling to ignore the uncanny family resemblance of the apparition glowering back at it. And so, neither half of Berlin ever achieved its pure idea of itself and neither Berlin ever made much sense without the other. To paraphrase Hegel, it takes both being and negation to achieve temporality. I exhale and glance sidelong at Karl. He is looking down and shaking his head, as so many former East Germans do, at the caprice of history.

In the course of my anthropological field research, on the professional transition of East German journalists since 1989, the same truism about Berlin reappears again and again, attributed to different writers since the turn of the century, perhaps to all narrators of the city, 'Berlin's fate is to always become and never to be'. This, I hear often in my interviews, I read it in newspaper articles updating the plans for the rebuilding of the city center and I even see it printed on ragged scraps of paper pinned to journalists' bulletin boards. As though to remind them of the one unforgettable aspect of life in Berlin. That the city's cobblestone skin bears the traces of effort after effort to manifest it as the focal point of world history. First as

the center of the Prussian Reich, next as the intellectual and industrial center of the post-imperial republic, then as 'Germania', the colossal exhalation of Nazi will, then as the sibling powers of capitalism and socialism intertwined and rising like a Phoenix from the ashes of the mother city. Finally, as the cultural center of the next millennium, with glass-and-steel spires rising to celebrate transnational corporations and the birth of a new era of European history. Berlin's streets are like sutures that hold grafts of these various inchoate imaginings together. Each new order promises a complete revision of the cityscape. But, Berlin is always becoming. Each new millenarian project exhausts itself on its Icarian flight to the sun, falling back to the Prussian sand-bed, leaving an unfinished masterpiece, a work that yet contributes to the urban palimpsest the husks of its promises and its prophecies.

The Berlin Karl and I are traversing has been becoming again since 1990 when the two Germanys unified. The visitor's sense is of living in a city under harried revision. Ubiquitous cranes, gouged craters, mounds of sand and rubble have appeared on the surface. Virtuoso works of glass-and-steel post-modern architecture have occupied the lots of former crumbling blocks of flats. Glass-and-steel is everywhere in the new Berlin, as though each building sought to reveal its inner operations before it has even been occupied, as though to demonstrate to a world uneasy with the power of a newly united Germany, that all its motives are transparent. That nothing is being hidden.

Meanwhile, beneath the streets, Berlin is even being forced to yield some of its secrets. By some estimates there are still 15,000 bombs nestled in the damp sand under the city, some with homes, some with schools now built over them. It is not uncommon for city blocks to be evacuated as workers uncover a bomb or a mine or a grenade. Hitherto unknown bunkers and grottos also continue to be discovered and publicly mulled over like pharaonic tombs. All these events seem to unfold without any direct orchestration. Daily life is deceptively constant and then suddenly there is an immediate effect, a surreal imposition of change, that disorients the citizen while perhaps enchanting the flaneur. Here a renovation project or an ad hoc cafe has blossomed, there a storefront has disappeared. Statues and memorials vanish. Street and subway station names are still being haggled over and change, seditiously, overnight. Glamorous malls have appeared in formerly ghostly vacant side streets – stubborn rebuttals to any established pattern of shopping. Even old Nazi and socialist-era administrative buildings are acquiring new identities, shaking out the phantoms of civil servants past and welcoming new legions of bureaucrats as the federal government prepares to occupy the city for the new millennium. If we were in Latin America such apparitions could be attributed to 'magical realism', but this is Germany (where realism is allegedly an earnest affair) and one is assured that there is an order and purpose to all events. Above all, these changes are

occurring in the East, 'to bring it up to the western standard' as the municipal politicians never tire of saying. In the grand image of the Berlin of the next millennium, there will be no trace of longitudinal differences, East and West will blend seamlessly into the horizon of the future.

Yet, despite all plans to the contrary, a 'wall of glass' (as one journalist describes it to me) continues to divide the formerly eastern and western Berliners. A great deal is seen and surmised, little is discussed openly. West German arrogance, East German ungratefulness, are whispers one hears often in conversation. 'The Ossies don't seem to understand democracy', 'they can't take the fast pace of this life', 'they have no initiative, they're bleeding us dry', 'they want their socialist security network back'. 'The Wessies always degrade us', 'all they care about is money', 'they're incapable of real human relationships with one another', 'they wear masks, they're colder somehow'. Being a foreigner, living in Berlin, and spending a great deal of time talking with East and West Germans about one another is like a child watching an unhappy marriage lurch along from suspicion to suspicion. One senses that the East and West Germans do not hate one another so much as they feel unjustly treated by one another, lied to, laughed at and undercut behind their backs. Unanswered questions, vague promises, adolescent passion brought them to elopement. Disenchantment set in on the ride home. Now each step forward to the millennium is as painful as watching the bitterness of soured dreams twist the lips of an aging couple, as demoralizing as watching that helpless absence of hope.

It was not so long ago that East and West Germans were seen embracing one another as strangers in the effervescence of unity. 'I didn't live far from the Wall, you know, but there I sat on that night, watching the whole thing on TV like a stupid cow. It was unimaginable.' Sometime not long afterwards, a unified German nation became imaginable and, later, actual. The question was what kind of nation it should be. The newly 'democratized' East German intellectuals wanted the new nation to at least be a collaborative effort between eastern and western politicians. After all, 'unification' was a tremendous opportunity to create a better and less inchoate society than either of the Cold War German states had managed. West German political and intellectual elites found this unfathomable: were the East Germans really suggesting that West German democracy and society could be improved upon? As though to salve the sores brought on by the calls for a 'third way' alternative, western elites undertook a systematic but perhaps not entirely conscious program of discrediting the legacy of the GDR as the legacy of a totalitarian, criminal regime. Formerly championed 'dissident' intellectuals like Christa Wolf and Heiner Müller were tried in the *feuilleton* sections of major newspapers and judged spoiled by their conviviality with state power. GDR Politburo members were tried in court for the 'shoot to kill' order for citizens trying to leave the GDR without sanction.

'Eastern-ness' in general rapidly became associated with social pathologies like informing for the secret police and right-wing violence. 'East Germans' came to be referred to as the 'more German' Germans because of their supposed predisposition for traditional German values of locality, collectivity, and cultural purity. Re-reading West German newspaper clips from the period, I am struck by the reiteration of cancer metaphors. They expressed deep western anxieties about suturing an eastern 'limb' to their nation. Could this 'more German' penchant for intolerance and violence metastasize, spreading from eastern nodes into the healthy torso of the West?

The bustling reconstruction of Berlin is a physical therapy for such anxieties. The objective is, wherever possible, to sanitize lingering traces of eastern-ness. It is one thing to denigrate the legacy of the GDR in texts and narratives, but, memory and identity, it is said, reside in associations (Michel de Certeau has the beautiful phrase: 'Haunted places are the only ones people can live in . . .', 1984: 108). West German politicians, and especially Berlin politicians, are aware that the living memory of the GDR exists in the relationship of its citizens to its places and to its Ozymandian relics. Dismantling signs of historical depth is thus corollary to the process of imagining Berlin's millennial future. 'All GDR-era buildings are always described as "crumbling" in the western press', one journalist remarked to me ironically. Renovation and demolition are thus natural and desirable alternatives. I find many of my interlocutors waging a continuous struggle to maintain a balanced memory of the GDR against the onslaught of renovation and against the influence of what they feel are pernicious caricatures of the GDR publicized in the western media. 'The West Germans see our life as one-dimensional, as though we lived like prisoners without families or any happiness.' 'It was a whole life in the GDR', punctuated by moments of joy and sorrow and monotony. But the struggle for this balance is deeply private and often, so it seems, quixotic. In memory, nostalgia about the GDR intensifies in precise correlation to the criminalization of the GDR past in the mainstream media. This is, I believe, inadvertently linked to erasure of signs of the GDR. The shallower the reservoir of public symbols and associations, the more mnemonic space is cleared for caricatures, both positive and negative, to flourish.

I am daily struck by the growing absence of artifacts of the GDR in the city center. The erasure of the Berlin wall has been among the most successful projects of semiotic renewal. I remember an acquaintance, a cab driver, who drove me around the city looking for traces of the wall. We had little luck and he apologized that with all the new construction he was losing his bearings. Finally, in Kreuzberg, we found signs of where the wall used to lie, perhaps because Turkish and Kurdish Kreuzberg itself exists on the margins of German national imagination. In the deep night we squatted in

the middle of the street so he could show me, through worn patches of tar, the clips to which the modular pieces of the wall were bolted. 'The next time they re-pave this street,' he said softly, 'even this will be gone.' Somehow, until I knelt in its remains, the idea of a modular and erasable wall had never occurred to me. The image of the wall with which I had grown up was always monolithic, timeless, and deadly. The cab driver gestured down the street to where he, too, used to sit on the western side and dream about the edge of the world.

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My friend Karl is, by any measure, a fortunate East German. He has been able to work the East–West dynamic to his advantage. He understood what 1989 meant for the GDR perhaps even before the politicians knew. And thus Karl was able to capitalize upon 1989 with a foresight few others had. He quickly became a broker for a deal between his media organization and a West German media conglomerate that landed him with the equivalent of a tenured position until retirement, as a measure of thanks. Meanwhile, he has seen hundreds of his former co-workers retire or be set adrift in the reorganization of the eastern German media. It was the common practice of the new West German owners of eastern German media institutions to 'retire' older East German journalists who were considered too 'burdened by their history' to be re-educated for work in the unified German media. It was also common for media consultants to be hired to evaluate who among the younger generations of employees were 'too red' to embrace the values of a free and democratic media system. Well over 50 percent of former GDR journalists resigned in the first five years after unification.

Sitting with some of these individuals in their homes and in cafés, I listen as they describe Karl to me as a *Wendehals*, a 'turn-neck' or opportunist who sold his old colleagues and ideals out at the first opportunity. Karl reciprocally accuses them of being timid, listless functionaries who were unable to accept the progress of history. Karl had been a very senior journalist at ADN, the former GDR equivalent of Reuters, a centralized news agency that worked closely with the communist party Politburo to deliver representations of the world that conformed with the party's broader agenda. Each day Karl would help to assemble an image of everyday life in the GDR that was beamed to as many citizens as the state could reach: economic reports where every party plan was exceeded by 10 percent; interviews where every worker was happy and believed in the socialist state; foreign reports of a militaristic, cryptofascist West German state rotten with unemployment, crime, and drug-abuse; features where all witnesses confirmed that the wall was an 'anti-fascist barrier' erected simply to keep western provocateurs at bay; prognoses where all the experts confirmed that the GDR

was on the verge of fulfilling its promises of socialist utopia. No mention meanwhile of the East German secret police, of the young people shot trying to climb the wall; no mention of the pollution, the collapsing buildings, the rigged elections, the chronic supply shortages. I have met many, many East Germans who would deny they had any media to speak of in the GDR. Most felt insulted by this propaganda machine that seemed honestly to believe that if the image of a perfect society was transmitted, people would ignore the evidence before their own eyes and embrace it. In 1997, when people were staging retro-GDR parties and East Germans seemed increasingly nostalgic about the human decency of socialism, no one I ever met had any warm memories of the GDR media. 'It was like reading a newspaper from another planet.'

Whenever I ask Karl to tell me about his past work, he eludes me. Waving his hand as though to parry my questions, and looking down he will say, 'You know, things were bad back then, it was a bad business. One did many things that one was not proud of. But for me, you know, it was just a job. The party only tolerated a certain kind of journalism and that was that, there was no debate about it. So I just did my little piece of work, and then when I went home I did what I really wanted to do. I wrote travelogues; I wrote lyrics for a rock band; I invented things. I'm a creative person – too creative for the job I had back then, too creative for the job I have now.' He does not seek redemption in my approval as a few of my interviewees have. He does not say he is sorry for what he did either. I have spoken with other former professionals who feel that if East Germans shouldn't be proud of what they did before 1989, then they shouldn't be made to feel guilty about it either. After all, the rules of the game were completely different back then. A citizen had no recourse to the exercise of state power. And the West Germans, it is said, presume that had it been *them* living in the GDR then everything would have been different, no one of them would have tolerated party controls or spied on their neighbors for the secret police. 'These people forget,' one brilliant journalist tells me, 'that civil courage isn't an abundant human quality under the best of conditions, and perhaps even less so in Germany.'

Karl often recoils from western presuppositions about his past as if from undesired physical contact. 'Does *this* society live up to the perfection of its self-image either?' he says to me with a tremor of bitterness in his voice. And then, one night, without any prodding on my part, several beers ease the expression of a far deeper pain of recollection.

I always wanted to help people. From the very beginning when I was at a factory newspaper, I wanted to do something for the workers, that was my passion. If you came up through the ranks in journalism, if you were from a working-class family and didn't have any background, like me, then when you were working for a factory newspaper you really were doing it for the

workers, to try to help them in some way. To do something for the workers, you know? That was what I always tried to do back then, that's why I would try new things out for them. That's why I would have people come on my local TV show and do these talkshows with them. Even before talkshows were invented yet! I invented them! I invented them because I thought this was a way to bring the issues alive for people and I would record the conversations and transcribe the tapes myself. I was always trying to think of ways to do something for the workers. You know to help the lads out, yes, to do something for the lads. But then, well, as you went up in the hierarchy, you began to say to yourself, hey, what's all this then? You saw that no one had any idea what was going on outside. As you got higher up you realized that the people weren't the same anymore. That you were surrounded by the rulers instead of the workers and that the rulers were completely cut off from what was going on below them. Then you were corrupt. You were up there with the leaders and you were corrupt. That's how it always happened. But that's something you learned slowly and after a point you realized it was hopeless and you withdrew into your own work. But that's not how it was at the beginning at all. Only later, when you were already deep into the system did you become corrupt. That's how the system was designed. It was very clever.

There are decent people who have bad jobs. And, people can live with incredible contradictions between their beliefs and actions so long as they have a social network that supports these contradictions. I came to these conclusions after trying in interview after interview to settle the issue of why anyone would become a journalist in the GDR. Was it sheer opportunism as nearly every West German and a majority of East Germans assume? Journalists in the GDR were sometimes allowed to travel to the West, they were assigned better apartments by the state housing commission, they were respected party-members, even if many were ashamed, they say in retrospect, to even tell their friends what they did for a living. Journalism was also a way to get access to western print media sources forbidden to the rest of the population, and being a journalist meant being an insider to the real power apparatus of the GDR – the party. Social status hinged on the party in the GDR, and if one wanted to occupy any elite professional position, one was expected to join. This was part of every narrative I heard – most of my interviewees were fairly open in discussing the privileges they enjoyed relative to their fellow citizens. But, and this is the hard part for many people to believe, most said they also performed their tasks out of a conviction that they were contributing to the construction of a better, ultimately more just, society than existed anywhere in the West. 'You have to understand,' another friend once explained, 'that the *ideal* of journalism in the GDR seemed completely reasonable.'

Journalism was supposed to show life as it really is. That's a good thing isn't it? Journalism was supposed to be cosmopolitan, also a good thing, no? Journalism was supposed to unlock the intellectual heritage of the working class, and why not? It all sounded good. The problem was that you ran into the worst problems you could possibly imagine if you ever tried to put any of these ideals into practice. Because the reality was that 'to show life as it really is' meant photographing [head of the communist party] Honecker 40 times at a rally.

My interlocutors remembered those few months of truly 'free' journalism between the fall of the GDR propaganda apparatus and the arrival of the new western owners in voices of wonder. 'It was a gigantic time,' one man sputtered, 'One felt that anything was possible.' Even realizing the long-compromised virtues of socialist journalism was possible. But, like other GDR legacies, the ideals of socialist journalism have been demonized in the western media as the apologetics of propaganda work. The expertise and professional competence of former GDR journalists have uniformly been questioned. Were they not paid for 50 years *not* to tell people the truth? How could anyone with a critical or agile mind survive in such a professional climate? Following this logic, East German journalists who survived the initial layoffs received a crash course in 'competitive individuality' to rid them of their presumed communitarian tendencies. One journalist remembered his new chief editor waving a piece of paper in his face at a staff-meeting and shouting, 'Your colleague over there has done this excellent work, now what are *you* going to do to prove *yourself*?' Many more journalists voluntarily resigned after such training and they swelled the ranks of unemployed or underemployed former GDR journalists. Most cobble together work from freelance writing and editing. Some stay at home and continue to replay the events of 1989 and 1990 in their minds. Once or twice I become the target of pent-up venom toward the West. 'It was perfectly normal,' one journalist mentioned, that several of her former colleagues had become very ill after losing their jobs, 'since they had had so much of their lives wrapped up in the old system.' The new system, she said, overstrained their hearts.

Those who remain practicing journalists have been frustrated to discover that, despite 're-education', being identified as an 'East German journalist' usually means being identified with a deficient set of professional skills and competencies. East German journalists are said to be more regionally knowledgeable and emotionally available to their eastern public. But when it comes time to write lead stories and editorials, it is most often West German journalists who are selected to make these sanctified contributions to national discourse. Some West German journalists feel that it would be 'indecent' to let former communist propagandists address the nation. East

German journalists continue to be anxious about their job security, not because they are hostile to the idea of competitive individuality, rather because they recognize there is no level playing field. Being labeled an 'East German journalist' is already a subaltern inheritance.

This is perhaps why so many former East German journalists whisper to me about the similarities between the 'free' western press and the 'dictatorial' eastern press.

Before 1989 we had the party controls and directives, the censorship apparatus and the expectation of self-censorship. If a particular topic was embarrassing to the party then we obviously could never write about it, there was no debate, that was out of the question. Now there is the profit-principle to contend with. In principle we can write anything we want to, but there is no economic guarantee of this right. One must constantly ask oneself: will this topic sell? Will it scare away advertisers? The way power works in this system is much more subtle than in the GDR and much harder to pin down. But it is there.

Seen from this perspective, I understand just how absurd our bifurcation of 'free' and 'totalitarian' forms of journalism must appear to those who have practiced both. And how naïve we must seem to those familiar with direct practices of censorship when we ignore the principles of selectivity at work in our own media system. Or, perhaps they see their younger selves in our instinctive certainty that our system is the better one.

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I met Karl at his office this evening, ironically the old ADN building, now home to *Super Illu*, a colorful weekly magazine owned by West German publishing magnate Hubert Burda but targeted at East Germans frustrated at their negative representation in the mainstream western media. It's one of the very few new publications since 1989 that has found an audience in the East. The staff of *Super Illu* is an idiosyncratic blend of young ambitious West Germans working their way up through the hierarchy of the Burda empire, older East Germans who provide the 'pulse of the East', and a West German managerial class who vitriolically criticize the arrogance of their western brethren for deceiving and ignoring eastern readers. They represent a type I have also encountered elsewhere, West Germans who drown out quieter East German voices with vociferous self-criticism of their imperialistic tendencies. Karl has a minor job at *Super Illu*, writing features about life in the former East, photospreads of Weimar in the spring, and so on. He doesn't write about politics anymore, about East-West relations, or about GDR history. The additional time seems to suit him. In the year I was in Berlin, Karl developed a puzzle game, the concept for a restaurant chain,

and began organizing a franchise operation of vertical-blind cleaners. Karl also speaks little about his present work.

As we walk toward the river, I'm replaying in my mind a bitter argument between Karl and Gregor, one of his West German co-workers, at the pub the week before. Gregor is 30 years younger than Karl, West German, and, what the Germans call a *Querkopf*, 'a diagonal mind', the kind of person who is always critical of the existing order and looking to shake things up. He has a brilliant sarcastic sense of humor and a penchant for hyperbole, yet, he is as serious as Karl is when it comes to East-West relations and German history. Having been to the pub with them many times, I know that they always squabble with one another, despite their friendship. Part of this has to do with their styles of argument; Karl is a quiet, proud, and formal man who calculates quickly and speaks moderately. Gregor is perpetually disheveled and intense, leaning in to engage, shouting to emphasize his point. Whenever one of them asserts a definitive interpretation of East-West relations for my benefit, the other will immediately entrench himself to oppose the point. To lighten the mood, they laugh and make fun of the other and his position as being either that of an old GDR functionary or that of a young Wessie idealist. There is some history here. Gregor is passionate about bringing former East German politicians to accountability for their crimes against GDR citizens. He is fascinated by Karl as a product of the GDR elite and routinely mines him for information and opinions. Karl, meanwhile, is deeply uncomfortable about Gregor's crusade. Yet, he likes Gregor and treats him paternalistically as an idealistic young man who has not yet had to learn life's calculus of sacrifices and small triumphs. Karl patiently describes the everyday life of the GDR elite to Gregor in intimate detail to demonstrate to him that there were not pure 'victims' and 'perpetrators' in the GDR. Karl says instead that the whole *System* was sick with its corruption of purpose and that this sickness pervaded everyone. Gregor then will ask how justice can be served, how Germany will ever free itself of the burden of its history. And Karl will shrug and say, '*Nicht so*' ('not this way').

The argument I am remembering was the most intense I witnessed between them, meaner and more visceral than usual. There was little humor and irony in their exchanges, only the deadly seriousness of accusation. I saw how fragile this friendship was, built as it was upon the sandy depths of German history. What set them off was the trial of three surviving GDR Politburo members for the murder of the East Germans who were shot trying to cross the wall. In eastern Germany, the trial became a locus of outrage for East German feelings of resentment against the unification process as a whole. What right did the West German courts have to try the government of another sovereign nation? Why wasn't this trial being held in The Hague? 'The West Germans spoiled their chance at dealing with

fascism in 1945, so now they want a second chance.' 'It is East German history, East Germans should be trying them not West Germans.' Many East Germans told me that they felt the West Germans were holding the East Germans to a standard of accountability to which they never held themselves. And, they complained that the West German media portrayed the trial as though it were a completely legitimate exercise of power (see Figure 1).

Stupidly I provoke the argument by cautiously asking whether Karl and Gregor feel the sentences (ranging from three to six-and-a-half years) were reasonable or not. Gregor nods enthusiastically that the sentences are fair and adds that such trials are good things if Germany ever wants to transcend its dictatorial heritage. Karl counters that equating the GDR Politburo with the Nazis is absurd and tells Gregor that he must consider the mediating pressure of the Soviet Union. Furthermore, Karl says, Gregor should see that some of the Politburo members were decent people and honest socialists, at least until they were corrupted by power. The conversation turns to Walter Ulbricht, the long-serving General Secretary of the East German communist party who Karl offers as an example of such an honest socialist. The following is excerpted from my field-notes.

Gregor [clearly outraged, raising his voice]: I can't believe you're defending that asshole Ulbricht, Karl. What's wrong with you? This wasn't a nice guy, a good



Figure 1 Courtroom sketch of former GDR Politburo members Günther Kleiber, Egon Krenz and Günter Schabowski (second row) and their attorney during their 1997 trial in Berlin-Moabit. Artist C. Boer.

socialist. This was a bastard who turned a blind eye while Stalin butchered half of the German socialists. These were supposedly his friends, the people he'd lived with while he was in exile. And, because Stalin promised him control of the GDR, he looked the other way while Stalin killed half of his comrades out there. No wonder the GDR turned out the way it did with Ulbricht in charge. He just took the one dictatorship and replaced it with another . . .

Karl [taken aback]: Wait just a moment. You're getting your facts mixed up – Ulbricht actually *saved* half of the German socialists in Moscow because Stalin wanted to have them all killed.

Gregor [narrowing his eyes and jabbing his index finger in Karl's direction]: Come on, now. Ulbricht didn't care about any of these people, he was a bastard. He was the kind of guy who would sell all his old comrades out in order to get into power. In your beloved GDR, that's the way things were. They talked a lot about socialism but it was Stalinism, not socialism but Stalinism. It was a dictatorship. And even if the second German dictatorship wasn't 10 percent as bad as the first one, I'll grant you that, what was going on in Russia under Stalin was exactly as bad as in Germany under Hitler. People like Ulbricht made sure that the GDR became as Stalinist as Russia.

Karl [his face reddening in frustration]: You simply can't see everything in terms of black and white like that. A man like Ulbricht is much more complicated than you're portraying him. Certainly, by the end he was bad and corrupted by power, but at the beginning he really wanted something better. But he was under a lot of pressure from the Soviets you see, and then of course he became corrupted by power. But in the first years he was a truly convinced socialist.

Gregor: Ulbricht was a stooge of Stalin's, he looked on while his friends were being butchered and then he made sure that the GDR would become a dictatorship. Who built the wall anyway? It was Ulbricht and his cronies. You know, all these Politburo bastards, living it up while the rest of the population sat around like inmates. Maybe you forget that in your beloved GDR people were shot for trying to leave? It was people like Ulbricht that made that possible. Ulbricht should have been put on trial for what he did.

Karl [trying desperately to get a word in edgewise] . . . The situation wasn't that black and white . . .

Gregor [still jabbing his finger while fumbling for a cigarette]: You're always complaining about the trial of the Politburo members. [Lighting his cigarette] Well, I think they're lucky they got such light sentences for what they did. This is a civilized society now, a democracy, and we're completely justified in trying these people for their crimes against humanity. These people were responsible for the dictatorship, for the Wall, for the Stasi, for everything.

They didn't do anything after Hitler, they just rebuilt his dictatorship and said it was about socialism now.

Karl [now clearly angry and raising his voice]: Don't be so naïve! Do you think the West Germans did any better?

Gregor [raising his voice above Karl's]: You see, this is a *civilized society* now, a democracy, and we have to try people like your Politburo in order to protect our standards of human rights, to make sure that something like the Third Reich never happens again. If you don't punish people like them then nothing will ever change. And if this was really just '*Siegerjustiz*' (victors' justice) like you people keep saying then the GDR Politburo would be hanging from plum trees right now. That's what they would have done in the GDR, right? They wouldn't have bothered with a trial. That what real victors' justice is. Just because you made mistakes in 1945 isn't an excuse not to do the right thing now!

Karl [folding his arms and turning to look away from Gregor]: I'm truly frightened that people like you with your simplistic way of looking at things are going to grow up and run this country some day. I went through the same feelings as you did, through the same period of thinking that everything's so clear-cut. But you'll see, when you're older, it's not so easy as you're making it out to be.

The see-saw of accusation and counter-accusation continues for several minutes longer with Gregor railing alternately against Ulbricht and Hitler, the twin outrages of German history, while Karl becomes more and more non-responsive, interrupting occasionally to wave his hand in disgust at Gregor and say, 'You don't understand and you don't want to understand!' By now they are both looking at me instead of at each other. I begin to get a sick feeling that I am meant to arbitrate this dispute. Sensing that the yelling will not end unless I intervene, I eventually break into Gregor's diatribe:

Dominic [grabbing Gregor's arm to quiet him]: OK, OK, but I'm not so sure that the West Germans did such a good job back in 1945 either. I think that's what Karl is saying to you. In the West, in the East and in France a lot of the Nazis were able to have nice second careers after the war.

Karl [looking down at his beer and nodding]: That's right.

Gregor [snapping at Dominic in annoyance]: But how else could it have happened? I reject that argument because just because there were problems with what happened back then is no excuse not to do anything now. Besides that, that was a different generation back then who had to handle things in 1945. The generation who has to deal with this now is much different, with different views, a different history, the situation is totally different. I don't think you can compare the two.

Dominic: Fine, but then you can't judge Ulbricht's generation in terms of this generation's standards. I think there are also a lot of people of Ulbricht's generation in the West who deserved to spend their lives in jail but never did.

Gregor [matter-of-factly, looking at Karl]: That's irrelevant to what we have to do now. We have to work through this history now by prosecuting those people responsible for crimes which we can prove. We can't turn back the clock now, so we have to do the right thing and prosecute all these people who were responsible for this dictatorship.

Karl [bitterly, looking at Gregor]: The way you deal with the past is just how you do everything in the West. It's all black and white. There's no room for humanity anymore with you people. Why don't you try to think with a little bit more humanity for once? You need to understand how complicated the conditions were. You all think you know everything, and that your hands are clean.

Gregor [looking at Dominic and pointing at Karl]: You know, I get really sick of this nostalgia about the 'real existing socialism' and how happy everyone once was and how good they all were to one another. How capitalism is so exploitative and miserable for everyone. The only 'real existing' socialist state in the world right now is the Federal Republic of Germany, you know that? Germany has a real welfare state and the average citizen has a higher standard of living than anywhere else in the world. The kind of capitalism you imagine where the haves build walls to keep out the have-nots exists in Latin America, sure, but not here in Germany.

Dominic: You can find that kind of poverty in America too, though.

Gregor: Sure, if I lived in the United States, you can bet I'd have a huge house on Long Island and tons of money, because I would hardly pay any taxes compared to here. But I'm here in Germany, in this real-existing socialism, because I think socialism is OK, I really do. I mean, my neighbor, you know, he drinks 15 beers a day, that's his contribution to society, and for that he gets 2,500 Marks [1,280 euro] in state support every month.

Karl [softly, dismissively]: But what can you do with so little money?

Gregor [laughing]: Oh, he lives just fine. He can drink his 15 beers a day and we have more or less the same standard of living. Same size apartment. We both have a TV, he has a car, I have a car. But his contribution to society is drinking 15 beers a day while I go to work and bust my ass every day. But I'm really OK with that, you know, I support this system, but then it's just when I hear all this talk about the evil capitalist system I get angry because what we actually have here is a socialist system that functions much better than the one you had in the GDR ever did. Here everyone actually *does* have the same standard of living.

With this declaration, Gregor gets up and heads to the toilet. He leaves me with a quietly resigned and angry Karl. To break the silence, I make some insipid remark that the *zusammenwachsen* (growing together) of East and West seems like it is still some ways off. 'What *zusammenwachsen*?' Karl snorts, 'you know, I think there's going to come a time not long in the future when people in the West are going to have to take the values we had in the East more seriously. They're going to realize, as this society gets harder and harder, that the values people had in the East were good.' He waves his hand in the direction of Gregor's wake and lights a cigarette. When Gregor returns from the bathroom, Karl gets up silently and leaves the table to go sit at the bar for half-an-hour, presumably to cool down. Gregor too is calmer and explains his predicament to me,

Gregor: I'm not an exception really in my position. I'm part of a very well-defined social group, the people who came over in 1990 to help rebuild the East. Of course, of every hundred of us back then, there are only 10 of us still here now. But my position is not exceptional. Where I come from in Bavaria, people's opinions are much more critical about the East. That's the thing - when I'm in the West I do my best to defend the East, to explain to people how things really are over here, the struggles people have. Because their prejudices are really bad sometimes. Some of them think the Ossies are basically apes. Just last weekend, a relative and his wife came up to visit me and they'd never been anywhere in the East, not even Berlin, and they're driving around with me making fun of the people and the buildings and saying, '*this* is where all of our money is going, huh?' So I get all of that from the one side and then I have to come here after a hard day at work and listen to all this crap about victors' justice.

Dominic: I can understand your frustration with being caught in-between. But I can also see Karl's frustration with the way everything having to do with the GDR is either criminalized or suppressed.

Gregor: [annoyed, in English] *But you're the lucky guy then aren't you?* [in German] You can go back home again. You're lucky, you can just come over for a while, take a look around, talk to some people about East-West issues, learn something, and then go back home again. The rest of us here, we're stuck with this.

I *am* the lucky guy. The privileges of the ethnographer are the capacity of living in-between and the expectation of returning home. Finally, Karl and I arrive at our destination, the Palace of the Republic, jewel in the crown of the former East Berlin. It was somewhere for families, Karl has told me, with restaurants, theaters and arcades housed alongside its administrative functions. Karl has made a habit of pointing places out to me, places that have a special significance for East Germans. The Palace has been closed by the

city government for years now because of asbestos problems. And so it sits dormant, its body lying defiantly like Manet's *Olympia*, its gleaming copper windows reflecting the shimmering water of the Spree. Endless conspiracy theories circulate in East Berlin about the terms of its closing, about why, years later, the asbestos still hasn't been cleaned out. Karl declares that it was a political decision because the West Berlin politicians want to tear down this vast public symbol of East German identity and to rebuild the old imperial palace upon the same spot. Since these politicians can tolerate the imperial past and they can tolerate the next millennium, but nothing in between. Karl tells me I must find some way to sneak through the barricade, in order to bear witness before the West Germans obliterate every trace of the GDR having existed. Before the historical narrative of Berlin is revised so that the years from 1933 to 1989 can be said to never really have occurred.

While Karl stares at the Palace from across the river, I stare at his thinning hair. The last battleground, I have learned from watching Karl struggle with his own past and with others' interpretation of his past, is human memory. It is so fragile compared with how a society seeks to remember itself and with the material resources a society has for encouraging certain kinds of remembering. I never crossed the barricades that Karl has, but he has imparted to me his sense of urgency to chronicle, to tell before the sands of Berlin shift again, to document somehow the becoming of this moment in time.

clotted sand of Berlin
streets shimmer taut like skin
space is filled with making,
hammers pounding, shovels scraping
stone is crumbling, steel is reaching
angels dreaming, cherubs weeping

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